

Guilt Feelings and Guilt-Evoking Behavior

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Many people who function adequately or even well in our society nevertheless experience difficulties in fulfilling their roles because of mistaken ideas and inappropriate behavior connected with guilt feelings. Understanding guilt feelings requires that we recognize both the social usefulness of guilt feelings and the payoffs for individuals who choose to feel guilty. Though the concept and meaning of guilt is not considered here, it may be useful to note that this article observes Dreikurs' distinction between guilt and guilt feelings: "Guilt has little to do with guilt feelings. One may be guilty and not suffer from guilt feelings; conversely, one may feel guilty without being so" (1950/1967, p. 230).

Guilt feelings are a learned response to social situations, but situations themselves do not cause guilt feelings. Situations cannot evoke guilt feelings unless the individual chooses to feel guilty. Helping teachers and parents cope with feeling guilty and avoid evoking guilt feelings in others involves three steps: (1) identifying guilt-evoking situations and behavior, (2) identifying the individual's payoffs for feeling guilty, and (3) changing guilt feelings and guilt-evoking behavior.

1. Identifying Guilt-Evoking Situations and Behavior

Guilt feelings result from manipulation (Shostrom, 1969; Smith, 1975; Steiner, 1974, p. 378 ff.), and both feeling guilty and evoking guilt feelings in others have payoffs. The emotions associated with guilt are, as Dreikurs pointed out, "deliberately evoked by society and its representatives... to promote conformity" (Dreikurs, 1950/1967, p. 229). Guilt feelings reinforce the norms of the group (whether it be family, school, community, or nation) by maintaining the hold of the group's belief system over the individual (Durkheim, 1961). As a consequence, manipulation by evoking guilt feelings is common. Teachers, parents, and all those who feel a need to control evoke guilt feelings to maintain discipline and to punish departures from expected behavior ("I'm disappointed in you..."). Children evoke guilt feelings in adults to get their way or to make adults feel bad ("But everyone has one, why can't I?").

The problem with using guilt feelings to manipulate others is that manipulation doesn't change underlying beliefs, behaviors, or relationships. A

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short-term effect may be produced, but in the long run, what seems like change is part of a continuing pattern of manipulation.

Evoking guilt feelings attempts to change people by making them think they are not good enough as they are, whereas change can only be based on strengths. Evoking guilt feelings is an attempt to manipulate others by threatening their self-image. Guilt-evoking behaviors are only successful because of beliefs and attitudes which allow an individual to be manipulated. For example, an individual who has his own over-ambitious self-expectations easily feels guilty. By recognizing guilt-evoking behavior, the individual takes the first step in learning not to feel guilty.

Appeals to What's Expected. One of the most common ways to induce guilt feelings is to appeal to what is expected. We are brought up to believe that it's our duty to live up to the expectations of others, and that we should feel guilty when we don't. We are taught that we have a duty to be loyal, obedient, helpful, and not cause trouble. The problem with this belief is that we are not taught to ask whether loyalty is deserved, whether obedience is appropriate, or whether "not causing trouble" leaves us at the mercy of others.

Appeals to Fairness. As Dreikurs (1971) was fond of saying in his lectures, "life is not fair." By trying to make life fair, we often open ourselves to the manipulative and guilt-evoking behavior of others. Parents and teachers are particularly susceptible to demands for fairness, such as: "It's not fair," "He (she) got more!" or "How come I don't get any?" Even when the adult refuses the demand, the adult often feels guilty and inadvertently reinforces the child's behavior.

Appeals to Caring. Such sentences as "Don't you care what people think?" "Don't you care about me?" and "What will the neighbors think?" often communicate the following message: either you do what I say, or you don't care (and should therefore feel guilty). Such sentences are traps. The person who says "Yes, I care!" often feels obligated to capitulate. The person who says "No, I don't care!" easily feels guilty and often ends up giving in anyway. The alternative is to realize that it is possible to care and to avoid giving in.

Appeal to Love. Appeals to love typically occur between husbands and wives and between parents and children: "If you really loved me you would. . ." The apotheosis of such demands is the fairy tale where a man must prove his worthiness by slaying dragons, climbing glass mountains, or performing other feats equally unrelated to love. We devalue love by making it a reward (the princess is always a reward—*along with real estate, e.g., half the kingdom*). We don't prove our love by allowing ourselves to be manipulated into feeling guilty. Likewise, we don't have proof of another's love because we manipulate that person into honoring our appeals.

Nagging and Criticism. Nagging and criticism, though nominally aimed at solving problems, are usually delivered with a tone of voice that means “You’re a bad person not to comply with my wishes and you should feel guilty about it.” Statements such as “I’ve asked you a dozen times,” “This room is a mess!” or “How can you just sit there and do nothing!” communicate a judgment of the person. It is this judgment of the person which tends to induce guilt feelings.

Helplessness. Dreikurs often pointed out that helplessness frequently gets service (e.g., see Dreikurs, 1958, 1971). People who use helplessness to get service often succeed by inducing guilt feelings in others. Statements such as “I just can’t seem to do this right” may be said in a way which implies a very different message: “You’re a rat for expecting me to do this without helping me.” (or “I would like you to do this so I would not have to.”)

Non-verbal Behavior. Non-verbal behavior, either by itself or as a part of a verbal interaction, is often extremely effective in inducing guilt feelings. The most common examples are crying, pouting, and silence. Crying is effective in inducing guilt feeling when it persuades the other person to accept the crying as his or her problem. Men who say “I can’t stand to see a woman cry” are an example; they “can’t stand it” because they make the crying their problem (they choose to feel guilty when someone cries). Likewise, pouting is a way of saying, “You won’t give me my way, so you’re made me miserable.” “If I can’t have my way, I’ll make myself miserable—and you should feel responsible and guilty.” The “silent treatment” (refusing to talk) is often a mixture of crying, pouting, and anger—all designed to make the other person feel sorry and guilty.

2. Identifying Payoffs for Feeling Guilty

Though society and its representatives (e.g., teachers, parents, bosses) evoke guilt feelings in order to manipulate, those who learn to feel guilty continue to do so because they receive payoffs (rewards) for feeling guilty. These payoffs include feelings of superiority, avoidance of consequences, and avoidance of change. By recognizing the payoff for feeling guilty, an individual is in a position to decide whether these payoffs are worth the price of feeling guilty.

Feeling Superior. Feeling guilty is used by an individual to confirm in his or her own mind that he or she is superior to others (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 307; Dreikurs, 1950/1967, p. 233). This explains why those who feel the greatest guilt are often those who are considered good by others. People who could be more effective by giving up guilt feelings are often reluctant to do so because they would have to give up their feelings of superiority.

Avoiding Consequences. Feeling guilty can serve as a way of avoiding consequences. Guilt feelings do not help an individual deal with the true con-

sequences of an action. When a child spills a glass of milk, someone must clean up the milk; whether or not the child feels guilty does not change the consequences. Yet, a mother may encourage guilt feelings in the child because she feels frustrated, and then proceeds to clean up the mess because the child has not been trained to cope with the consequences of an action, whether intentional or not.

Even young children can learn to accept responsibility for their actions and act accordingly (Dreikurs, 1968; Glasser, 1965, 1969). It is hard work to teach children to do this, and even harder to teach parents not to induce guilt feelings.

In an effort to avoid feeling guilty, some people put undue emphasis on the purpose or intention with which they acted. Whether or not an action was done on purpose is irrelevant to the fact that the action has consequences. Responsibility can be encouraged by insisting that the consequences of an action, even an accidental action, be dealt with. Many power struggles could be avoided by not making judgments or inducing guilt feelings even when behavior is "on purpose."

Avoiding Change. Guilt feelings are often demonstrations of good intentions which serve as a substitute for change: "We develop guilt feelings to express good intentions that we do not want to act on. We would rather blame ourselves than mend our ways" (Dreikurs, 1971, p. 20). While good intentions and guilt feelings are thought by some to be necessary to bring about change, just the opposite is the case: "Guilt feelings appear only if one is unwilling to amend and is still trying to maintain the assumption of his good intentions. As soon as sincere efforts are made to atone or amend, guilt feelings disappear" (Dreikurs, 1950/1967, p. 234).

Many people accept irresponsible action as long as it is accompanied by expressions of good intentions. For example, when a reprimand is given for irresponsibility, the issue at stake is not usually who is irresponsible, but rather, who is boss. Thus, a person who is apologetic and acts stupid can get away with almost anything.

3. Changing Guilt Feelings and Guilt Evoking Behavior

Feeling guilty and evoking guilt feelings in others are learned behaviors. We can reduce or even stop both types of behavior by learning appropriate language, attitudes, and actions. In working with teachers and parents, I find that feeling guilty and evoking guilt feeling in others (especially children) are related. In helping teachers and parents adopt more effective ways of resolving conflicts than evoking guilt feelings, I need to help them cope with their own guilt feelings as parents and teachers. I have found teaching the concepts of problem ownership, responsibility, and consequences have helped teachers and parents to analyze and change inappropriate language,

attitudes, and behaviors. I notice that the process seems to resolve itself into five steps, not necessarily in the following order.

Step 1. Establish Problem Ownership. Guilt induction often succeeds when we accept responsibility for problems which are not ours. Teachers who report that they used to feel responsible for solving every problem brought to them by students, parents, and administrators, find that they are less easily manipulated into feeling guilty when they establish who owns a problem. Taking time to ask "Is this my problem?" is often sufficient to avoid both feeling guilty and inducing guilt feelings in others.

Step 2. Assume Responsibility for Feelings. The counterpart to not assuming responsibility for others' problems is assuming responsibility for one's own problems—including the problem of feeling guilty. The realization that "I make myself feel guilty" gives people power over their own emotions which they do not have when they assume that other people make them feel, think, and act against their will.

Step 3. Become Aware of One's Own Goals. Understanding that emotions reveal our true intentions is a key to assuming responsibility for guilt feelings. The concept of goals can be communicated simply but effectively by having people ask themselves "What am I getting out of feeling guilty?" Even young children can learn to do this if they become aware of what they are doing. When my six-year-old daughter would make a show of feeling guilty and feeling sorry for herself, I would sometimes ask her in a gentle but matter-of-fact way, "Could it be that you enjoy, just a little bit, making yourself feel bad?" She would often respond by giggling, a common recognition reflex (see Dreikurs, 1958, 1968; Dreikurs, Grunwald & Pepper, 1971). She felt foolish, but she was also discovering that she controls her own feelings.

When we realize that we make ourselves feel the way we do, and further, that we are getting something out of doing this, we can no longer take our misery and helplessness so seriously. When we realize that we are putting on an act, we feel silly, but in that moment we gain control over how we feel and over what we do.

Step 4. Focus on Consequences. When we concentrate on coping with the consequences of behavior instead of making judgments of ourselves and others, we are more effective in solving problems. Concentrating on coping with consequences becomes a substitute for guilt-evoking behavior and for feeling guilty.

Step 5. Have the Courage to be Imperfect. The "courage to be imperfect" (Dreikurs, 1971) is the courage both to accept oneself and the courage to take action. Equally important is encouraging others to accept themselves and to take action. This is the encouragement process (Dreikurs, 1971, pp. 120-122).

Summary

Feeling guilty and evoking guilt feelings in others both have payoffs, but both also perpetuate manipulative, ineffective behavior. Avoiding guilt feelings and guilt-evoking behavior requires (1) recognizing situations and behavior which evoke guilt feelings, (2) recognizing the payoffs for feeling guilty, and (3) choosing alternative attitudes and behaviors.

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“All you need to do to become ill in our modern world is to follow ordinary patterns of diet and life-style.”

—Dr. Charles T. McGree
