

Navigating Guilt

An interactive worksheet for reclaiming values after trauma or regret

After a traumatic event, the mind often searches for a "why" and settles on the self as the cause. This worksheet helps you distinguish guilt from shame, examine responsibility in context, and move toward purpose. Work slowly and pause if you become overwhelmed.

Name (optional)

Date

What would help this reflection feel emotionally safe enough today?

Distress now (0 = none, 10 = extreme)

Before continuing, check what you can do if distress rises:

- ☐ Pause, ground myself, or contact a trusted person or professional.
- ☐ Complete this only in a setting that feels reasonably safe.
- ☐ Remember that I can skip any question or stop at any time.

1. Foundations

Distinguish a regretted action from a global judgment of identity

Guilt says, "I did something bad." Shame says, "I am bad." Guilt can signal a value and support repair. Shame often turns one event into a conclusion about the whole self.

Feature	Guilt	Shame
Core belief	I did something bad.	I am bad.
Focus	Behavior or decision	Identity or worth
Effect	May guide repair	Often drives hiding

Which best fits your experience?

- ☐ My distress is mainly about an action or omission.
- ☐ My distress has become a judgment about who I am.
- ☐ Both feel true right now.
- ☐ My guilt points toward a realistic repair or value.
- ☐ My guilt assumes control I may not actually have had.

What action do you regret, and what identity judgment have you attached to it?

2. Identify Your Guilt Pattern

Check every pattern that fits your experience

☐

Survivor guilt

Being happier, safer, alive, or successful feels disloyal.

☐

Separation / disloyalty guilt

Independence or different values feel like betrayal.

☐

Omnipotent responsibility

I feel solely responsible for fixing or preventing others' pain.

☐

Self-hate guilt

I conclude that I am damaged, unworthy, or undeserving.

☐

Deontological guilt

My distress centers on violating a moral code or rule.

☐

Altruistic guilt

My distress centers on empathy for a specific person I may have hurt.

Which pattern is strongest? What does it predict would happen if you let yourself heal?

3. Cognitive Debriefing

Challenge hindsight bias and identify trauma-related stuck points

Hindsight bias uses information available now to judge a decision made then. A fair review asks what you reasonably knew, noticed, understood, and could do in the moment.

What I knew THEN

What I know NOW

What would you say to the person who did not have today's information yet?

Where has guilt become stuck?

☐ Safety - danger feels everywhere

☐ Esteem - feeling damaged or unworthy

☐ Trust - difficulty trusting self or others

☐ Intimacy - fearing closeness

☐ Power / control - helplessness

How has this stuck point changed your daily behavior?

4. The Responsibility Pie

Replace all-or-nothing blame with a fuller causal picture

List contributing factors and assign percentages totaling 100%. Include context, other people, limitations, stress, and information you did not have.

Contributing factor	Percentage
My actions / decisions	%
Environment or situation	%
Other people involved	%
Things I did not know then	%
Stress, fatigue, fear, or lack of support	%
Other	%
TOTAL (should equal 100%)	%

Other factor description

Initial personal responsibility

 %

Revised personal responsibility

 %

What changes when you see the whole picture?

5. Defusion and Self-Compassion

Observe the thought, identify its purpose, and answer with context

A self-critical thought I keep having

Say or sing it in a silly voice. What changed in its emotional power?

What function might the guilt be serving?

- ☐ Honoring a person, memory, or value
- ☐ Trying to prevent a future mistake
- ☐ Creating a sense of control over what happened
- ☐ Another purpose

How could you meet that need through purpose rather than pain?

Write to the younger you: state the facts, acknowledge age and experience, and offer kindness.

6. Values-Based Re-engagement

Choose a manageable action that reflects who you want to be

Psychological flexibility means making room for painful emotions while choosing behavior guided by values. Purpose can honor what matters more effectively than chronic suffering.

Value domains

☐ Family

☐ Community

☐ Career

☐ Spirituality

☐ Health

Core value

Long-term or lofty goal

One manageable action for this week

When will I do it?

Support person or resource

Action ideas

Connection: text one friend. Contribution: help briefly or volunteer.

Self-care: take a five-minute walk. Growth: read one page.

Distress now (0-10)

One thing I want to remember

7. Support and Next Steps

Create a care plan and know when to seek additional help

Immediate support

If you are in crisis or may harm yourself, call or text 988 in the United States. If there is immediate danger, call emergency services.

My warning signs that I am becoming overwhelmed

People or professionals I can contact

Grounding or coping steps that help me return to the present

Evidence-based options to discuss with a qualified professional

- ☐ TrIGR - trauma-informed guilt reduction
- ☐ CPT - cognitive processing therapy
- ☐ ACT - acceptance and commitment therapy
- ☐ PE or EMDR - trauma-focused treatment

My next step