

Getting Over Guilt

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Published

November 16, 2015

A hope to not be ruled by guilt is not to say that there is never a time and a place for recognizing things we have done wrong.

According to Buddhist psychology, there is a distinction that can be made between the feelings of remorse and guilt. If I were to get in an argument with a friend and say something hurtful to him or her hastily, feeling remorse after the conversation would be productive. Remorse does not look like guilt. It is not prolonged ruminating **fueled by self-hatred** but a pang of feeling that invites us to reflect. Remorse is thought to be a skillful state of mind, a byproduct of mindfully reviewing our actions, leading to a realization that we have said or done something that has harmed someone else. When we revisit our words or actions to experience our sense of regret, we are not necessarily self-flagellating with a barrage of negative thoughts (though, of course, that is possible — and inadvisable — too).

Remorse is not “good” and guilt “bad,” but it is seen as skillful because it allows us to experience pain as a response to harm we’ve caused another person. It comes from a place of compassion and mindfulness; we feel remorseful because we see someone else in pain, someone whose pain we caused, and we react with remorse because we recognize our fundamental connectedness. I said something that hurt you and now I am hurting. From there, we have created recognition and permission for ourselves, and then we can let go. When we let go, we don’t repeat the same mistakes.

Guilt is not seen as skillful because it is primarily driven by self-hatred. We do something we regret, say something that hurts someone we love, make a mistake. Then we then get lost in stories about what could have been, what we should have said or not said, or what we should have done or not done. This is conjured pain, which most often leads to a cycle of self-judgment and further guilt: *Why am I feeling guilty? Why did I not feel guilty last time something like this happened?*

On some level, we become addicted to guilt because we think ruminating repeatedly over a harmful statement or action will somehow absolve us of the negative experience we’ve caused another. But torturing ourselves is not a form of atonement. It merely makes us weary and more likely to act out in other facets of life as a result of feeling self-deprecated and inadequate.

A lot of the time, guilt comes up in response to things we do or don’t do for ourselves. In our competitive, ambition-driven culture, one of the most common ways I see and hear guilt being expressed is in the form of self-judgment: *I feel so guilty I didn’t do enough work today; I feel guilty I ate that cake; I feel guilty that I didn’t go to the gym.*

A friend of mine is a freelance writer and largely works from home. She also has trouble sleeping, so she sometimes finds her work schedule is not the typical 9 to 5. She’ll sometimes spend the night working and feel

fatigued during the day when others are on their fourth conference call. This friend is very hard on herself, and has had a long struggle of spinning into cycles of guilt and self-judgment when she wakes up late on a Tuesday, even if she gets all her work done. The other day, she recounted the fact that on a day she decided to wake up and “guilt herself” into working, she ended up getting nothing done, and spending the day stewing in further feelings of guilt and self-judgment. *God, I’m so lazy*, she had been thinking.

This friend saw that her self-judgment wasn’t a productive motivator, so the other day she took a nap during the day and decided to work at night. She recognizes her desire to work toward a schedule she might be more comfortable with, but she expressed a tremendous amount of freedom when she told me about the moment she realized the power of practicing compassion for herself. Sometimes we wake up too late. Sometimes our work schedule is off kilter. None of these things are worthy of guilt and scathing self-judgment, but our minds like to trick us into thinking that anger motivates us.

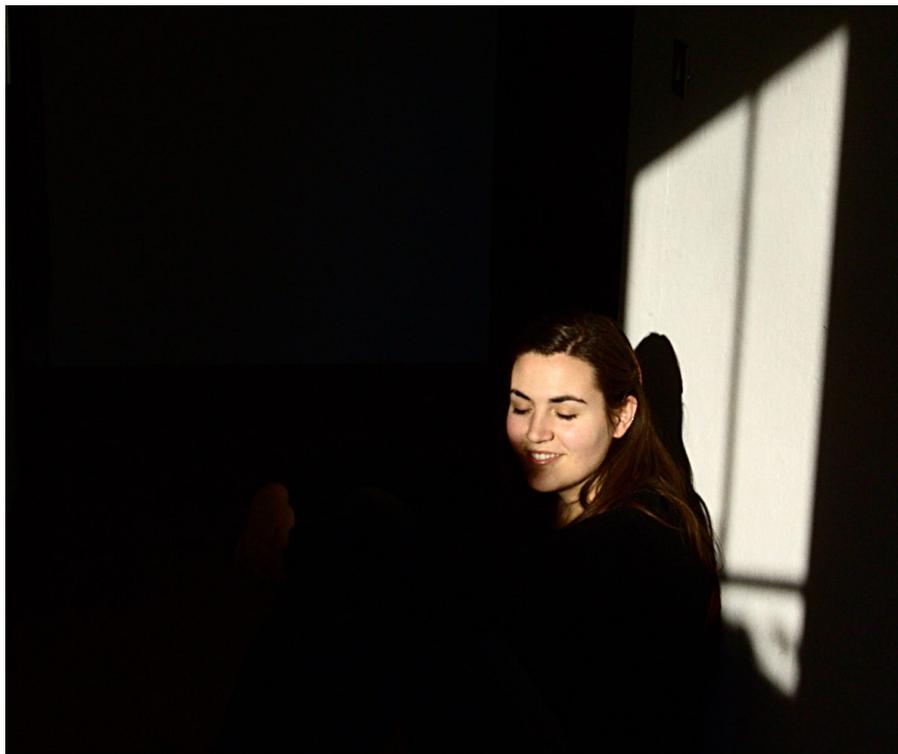


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Compassion is actually the most powerful form of atonement, despite the fact that our culture may teach us that it’s merely “sweet” or “weak.” This is likely due to the fact that we’re conditioned to believe that being hard on ourselves is a virtue, a precursor to excellence. If we crack the whip on ourselves, we can get more done, we can be better and stronger and more powerful, right?

Wrong. As psychologist **Dr. Kristin Neff** recently explained in an interview with *The New York Times*, “the biggest reason people aren’t more self-compassionate is that they are afraid they’ll become self-indulgent.” It’s true, and I’m sure most of us can relate to this. We tend to think that feeling guilty for an action we regret will be a successful form of self-punishment, and somehow make things better. Ultimately, anger impairs our judgment and causes us to exert energy all at once in unsustainable bursts. Compassion is fierce, motivating, and a

sustainable source of energy. It allows us to connect to ourselves and to others, and create a stronger foundation for skillful thoughts, words, and actions.

Difficult emotions can be all-consuming, which reminds me of a story about my goddaughter. She is now 17, but she became my goddaughter when she was three or four. When she was about nine years old, she started sending me emails through her mother. She'd dictate and her mother would write the email. This was the first e-mail:

"I have been thinking about things and I wonder if you can help me out. Where did the universe come from? Where does love come from? Where does space come from? And do love and space have anything to do with one another? Please tell me everything you know."

I thought, *Oh my God. Is this what being a godmother is like?*

Fortunately, there is a quote from the Buddha that says:

"Develop a mind so filled with love it resembles space which cannot be painted, marred or ruined."

So if someone were standing in this room throwing paint, there would be nowhere that could be ruined because it is so unconfined. I wrote some version of this in nine-year-old-appropriate language:

"Something happens. Someone hurts your feelings, and it hurts. But maybe your mind can be like the sky. And all these things you've heard and felt, those things can be more like clouds. Or, you could be like a sponge and suck it all in, and let it FILL you. All that toxic energy can enter you and become soggy like a sponge."

I didn't hear from my goddaughter again for a while, but a month later her mother wrote to me saying that my goddaughter had gotten into an argument with her younger sister, and that it was upsetting for both of them. In the aftermath of the fight, my goddaughter was apparently going around the apartment saying, *"I am like the sky. I am not a sponge."* That's a variant on love — self-love and compassion — right there.

We're conditioned to view ourselves as having faults, as being incomplete, imperfect — things for which we should feel guilty. We could easily spend our lives in a terrifying struggle to become (finally) good enough. When this pressure makes us overwhelmed, we get angry at ourselves — in the form of guilt. The Buddha said:

"Anger with its poisoned source and fevered climax is murderously sweet."

We become overcome by anger, which, in the case of guilt, looks a lot like the sponge filling with toxicity. We fixate on the mistake or "bad" situation unrelentingly, and develop tunnel vision. We cannot see alternatives or imagine a sense of perspective larger than our circumscribed pain.

The trouble with a feeling like remorse — and the reason we confuse it with guilt — is because it's uncomfortable. We often tend to immediately notice discomfort and suffering, and believe that having a rough time means there's something wrong with us. Nothing is wrong with remorse, or anger, or sadness, or jealousy. They are all feelings, and we can recognize and allow them without zeroing in on them and losing them to guilt — a form of self-punishment. We can show ourselves compassion and give ourselves permission. This is loving ourselves. This kind of love is not the same as narcissism or egotism. It's a tender space of caring. It is compassion — strong and creating the foundation of how we come into harmony with life.