

## Psychosocial Development

### Guilt/Mistrust/Shame

Psychosocial Development with regards to a brief guide to Guilt, Mistrust and Shame

#### **1. Stage 1: Trust versus Mistrust**

Trust versus mistrust is the earliest psychosocial stage that occurs during the first year or so of a child's life. During this critical phase of development, an infant is utterly dependent upon his or her caregivers. When parents or caregivers respond a child's needs in a consistent and caring manner, the child then learns to trust the world and people around him.

This stage occurs between birth and approximately 18 months of age. According to Erikson, the trust versus mistrust stage is the most important period in a person's life.

Because an infant is entirely dependent upon his or her caregivers, the quality of care that the child receives plays an important role in the shaping of the child's personality. During this stage, children learn whether or not they can trust the people around them. When a baby cries, does his caregiver attend to his needs? When he is frightened, will someone comfort him?

When these needs are consistently met, the child will learn that he can trust the people that are caring for him. If, however, these needs are not consistently met, the child will begin to mistrust the people around him. If a child successfully develops trust, he or she will feel safe and secure in the world. Caregivers who are inconsistent, emotionally unavailable or rejecting contribute to feelings of mistrust in the children they care for. Failure to develop trust will result in fear and a belief that the world is inconsistent and unpredictable.

#### **2. Stage 2: Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt**

The second psychosocial stage involves the conflict between autonomy and shame or doubt. As the child enters the toddler years, gaining a greater sense of personal control becomes increasingly important. Tasks such as learning how to use the toilet, selecting foods and choosing toys are ways that children gain a greater sense of independence. This stage occurs between the ages of 18 months to approximately age two to three years. According to Erikson, children at this stage are focused on developing a greater sense of self-control. Gaining a sense of personal control over the world is important at this stage of development. Toilet training plays a major role; learning to control one's body functions leads to a feeling of control and a sense of independence. Other important events include gaining more control over food choices, toy preferences and clothing selection. Children who successfully complete this stage feel secure and confident, while those who do not are left with a sense of inadequacy and self-doubt.

#### **3. Stage 3: Initiative versus Guilt**

The third psychosocial stage occurs between the ages of about three and five and is centred on developing a sense of self-initiative. Children who are allowed and encouraged to engage in self-directed play emerge with a sense of strong initiative, while those who are discouraged from these activities may begin to feel a sense of guilt over their self-initiated activities. Children need to begin asserting control and power over the environment by taking initiative by planning activities,

accomplishing tasks and facing challenges. During this stage, it is important for caregivers to encourage exploration and to help children make appropriate choices. Caregivers who are discouraging or dismissive may cause children to feel ashamed of themselves and to become overly dependent upon the help of others. Play and imagination takes on an important role at this stage. Children have their sense of initiative reinforced by being given the freedom and encouragement to play. When efforts to engage in physical and imaginative play are stifled by caregivers, children begin to feel that their self-initiated efforts are a source of embarrassment. Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose, while failure results in a sense of guilt.

### **Shame or guilt**

When defining shame and guilt, let us use those proposed by Tangney and colleagues in their publication of Shame and guilt. Their perspective of shame and guilt suggest that both are self-conscious emotions that are involved with negative self-evaluation. They go on to say that the difference between the two is that during shame the entire self is viewed negatively, while with guilt, a specific behaviour that brought on those feelings is negatively evaluated. "Guilt says that this behaviour is bad, while shame says that I am a bad person."

Guilt and shame are two of the most common, difficult, emotions to be dealt with in healing a majority of traumatic events. Guilt and shame are often both present in sexual abuse, childhood abuse and events that encompass death of another, eg. survivor guilt.

What is Guilt and Shame?

Guilt and shame are frequently thought of as the same concept, and the terms are often used interchangeably; however, theorists have recently made a distinction between the two concepts. Both emotions involve concepts of "wrong" behaviour or having done something "wrong," either by omission or commission. They also both involve negative emotions and cognitions related to the perceived offensive behaviour.

### **Shame**

Shame is a painful emotion arising from the knowing (consciousness) of something dishonourable, improper, ridiculous, disgraceful, embarrassing, etc, done by oneself or another. Shame is directly attributed to feeling guilty about something, hence shame and guilt intertwine. Shame consists of a negative evaluation of one's own worth, because he or she has acted "wrongly." Shame is conceptualised as including feelings of disgrace, disrepute, dishonour, loss of self-esteem, loss of virtue, and loss of personal integrity.

### **Guilt**

Guilt is the fact of being responsible for the commission of an offense. Guilt is composed of negative emotions related to wrongdoings or perceived failures to act appropriately. Guilt includes feelings of sorrow, repentance, and disappointment in one's actions. Guilt is both a cognitive and an emotional experience that occurs when a person realises that he or she has violated a moral standard and is responsible for that violation. A guilty conscience results from thoughts that we have not lived up to our ideal self.

According to the above definitions of both guilt and shame, it could be said that, guilt is concentrated on one's actions, while shame is directed toward one's moral integrity and self-worth, and/or past actions and how they are perceived. In other words, a person who feels shameful may think that he or she is to blame for the immoral act and is therefore a bad person. Conversely, a person who feels guilty may believe that he or she acted wrongly and therefore feels that his or her actions were wrong, but they can still maintain a positive view of the self as a person.

As stated above, guilt intertwines directly with the feeling of shame. Shame is a near impossible emotion to try and resolve, because there is an underlying component of guilt and/or an emotional cocktail of both. The primary resolution to shame is directly through guilt itself.

The theoretical answer to understanding guilt is quite easy according to some psychologists and comprises four points which hope to ascertain the realistic facts of a situation which can then be used towards changing guilt cognitively.

1. Who owns which part of blame for the actual event
2. Remove the 'what ifs' and 'if I had only did this' thinking
3. Review the choices made using the actual facts, not hindsight.
4. Review your moral standards against the facts at the time, not hindsight.

This should allow you to understand the facts based on the event itself.

A further problem with guilt is that many people use self-blame, which invokes guilt, in an attempt to reduce shame. This can lead directly to become their own cycle of internal emotional abuse. You begin feeling guilty for being ashamed of something you or another did, which creates self-blame, further shame, more guilt and the cycle continues until you intervene within it or breakdown.

You are the only person who has the capacity to change you. External influences can only assist, guide, provide you knowledge or techniques, you have to actually evoke the change to remove shame. Educating oneself about the trauma and being honest with others about what happened, will allow the blame to be placed where it belongs, and allow self forgiveness.