

Guilt

Medical Patient Education Module

Addiction invariably produces feelings of shame and guilt that damage the addict's self-esteem. Shame and guilt are both negative feelings related to the experience of addiction, but shame differs from guilt in the following way: Shame refers to negative beliefs about oneself; for example, one is a weak, worthless, or deficient person. Guilt refers to the belief that one has engaged in wrongful behavior, such as stealing to obtain money for drugs. Because shame is about oneself and guilt is about one's behavior, feelings of shame are more profoundly damaging to the self and more difficult to heal.

Addicts usually experience feelings of both shame and guilt over their behavior even while in their active addiction. Individuals often feel ashamed of themselves for becoming addicted and may not feel worthy or deserving of recovery. They may have engaged in guilt-producing behaviors that are illegal and/or immoral, such as theft or prostitution to get money for drugs. They may feel that they have emotionally injured family and friends. They may have regrets about what they have lost, such as their job, home, or family.

If the person with substance dependence feels ashamed or guilty, continued addictive behavior may help the person escape temporarily from these bad feelings. It also may serve as a way for addicts to hurt or punish themselves. An addictive disease can become a downward spiral in which a person with substance dependence gets high to escape the pain that is the consequence of getting high.

The counselor should help the patient to identify and talk about any feelings of shame and guilt. The counselor will want to show the person with substance dependence how the addictive behavior is not a true relief but actually contributes to these painful feelings about oneself. Healthy, responsible living should be encouraged as the way of restoring self-esteem and self-respect. Counselors should point out that being a responsible spouse, employee, friend, or family member can promote improved self-esteem.

Making amends, or apologizing, to people one has wronged in one's addiction is another way to restore self-esteem and self-respect. This apologizing can be done, if the patient so desires, whenever it is feasible and will not be hurtful to the other person. Taking a personal inventory, which is the topic of the next section, also helps to counteract the effects of the shame and guilt of the addiction by giving the recovering person a structure for facing up to and honestly taking account of the damaging or bad behaviors engaged in during the active addiction. This inventory leads to the possibility of making amends, which, in turn, can lead to letting go of the shame and guilt.