
Are You Suffering from False Guilt?

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There is guilt that truly belongs to us. And, there is false guilt. Here is a look at the difference between them. First, there is true guilt. For instance, a young man, we will call A.J., was driving with several friends in his car. They had been drinking. He was enjoying his friends when suddenly A.J. hit another car. The other driver was injured. There is no question about A.J.'s behavior. He was truly guilty of driving while under the influence of alcohol

Another American young man, B.W., married a woman from Brazil, named A.T. (again, not the person's true initials). There were cultural differences and neither he nor his new wife could reconcile the differences that came up daily for the couple. They sought counseling; yet, after giving five years to the marriage, the two of them were fighting nearly every day. They could agree on one thing. The two decided to divorce. B.W., however, could not shake the feeling of guilt. He had grown up in a church that said divorce should never happen. In fact, he was taught that people are sent to hell for the sin of divorce. B.W. suffered a great amount of inner turmoil, thinking he, somehow, could have made the marriage work.

As the years passed, he was helped by attending a church where divorce was looked at differently. The pastor told him, "Divorce is kind, if it ends something cruel. God forgives us when we make choices that are less than best." B.W. knew that continuing in his marriage would have been cruel to himself, and that would also be true for his wife. The guilt was still felt until he came to my office for counseling. After a few sessions, B.W. could see his patterns of feeling guilty about a lot of happenings in his life. He learned the difference between feeling guilty for a wrong action, and feeling guilty out of a tendency to be overly responsible. He forsook the teaching of his childhood that caused him to fear going to hell for having a divorce in his life. B.W. found freedom in realizing that: 1) God heals our lives from brokenness when we ask for God's help, 2) When we forsake wrong behaviors, God forgives our wrong doings, never to hold them against us, and 3) Mistakes become our teachers when we purpose to learn from them.

For sure, God does not want us to live with guilt of any kind. "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (Isa 1:18).

We learn how to defeat false guilt by recognizing it, then releasing it. We can say, "My spirit is done with that" each time we see the pattern of being responsible for something that is out of our control. Below is a list that includes a few of the tendencies that reveal a pattern for carrying false guilt. If you own up to even one of these tendencies, you are

dealing with false guilt. Now, you can begin to weed out all messages within your thought life that support this unhealthy pattern.

1. I worry daily about my actions, and my choices.
2. I feel responsible when things go wrong.
3. I'm always blaming myself.
4. I'm *often* apologizing; saying, "I'm sorry" (to the point of overuse).
5. I care a lot about what others think of me.
6. I find it hard to say "no" to others.

“False guilt comes from saying no to people...
The only true guilt comes from saying no to God.”

From Paul Tournier's *Guilt and Grace*.