

From Guilt and Shame to Self-Compassion

By Myra Walden

“We use Nonviolent Communication to evaluate ourselves in ways that engender growth rather than self-hatred.”

~MARSHALL ROSENBERG

Are feelings of guilt and shame necessary to learn from mistakes? I believe they are not. We have been conditioned to think that these emotions are valuable to help people grow. In reality, they contribute to low self-esteem and can result in depression, anxiety, addictions, and troubled relationships. Sometimes, we become mired in a cycle of self-condemnation followed by self-justification. Or we get stuck in self-judgment indefinitely. At times, we defend against guilt and shame by denying responsibility for our actions in an attempt to preserve self-respect.

I propose that the natural mechanism for learning from mistakes is regret, which leads to mourning and growth. Nonviolent Communication provides us with an elegant process to learn from actions we lament.

Guilt and shame associated with actions we regret

Needs we did not meet — First, we recognize the needs — values — that we did not meet by the action, such as respect, consideration, honesty, and the like. We feel the pain of acting in a way that was not in harmony with our values. ***Mourning, experiencing regret and sorrow, is crucial because it is in this process that growth takes place.*** Next, we look at the wish underlying the action.

Needs we were trying to meet — We identify the needs that we were *attempting* to meet, albeit unskillfully. Perhaps we yelled at our partner because we needed empathy, respect, or help. Then, we consider larger forces influencing us.

Life-alienating systems — We look at the systems that stimulate guilt and shame in us. Is it the family, an institution, the culture? Did it originate in childhood, a time when we might have often received messages of being “bad” and “wrong”? Eliciting guilt and shame is an effective way to control others. Becoming aware of this dynamic is liberating. Sometimes the person exerting domination tactics is oneself!

Perhaps, we have internalized the notion that there are certain things we “should” do and feel guilty when we don’t. If this is true for you, I invite you to translate such means of self-control into a statement that acknowledges your autonomy as well as your values. *“I choose to do this because I value _____.”* This approach dissolves resentment and increases motivation. The next step in transforming guilt and shame is restoration.

Restoration — We take an action to restore wholeness to the relationship at hand. This can help rebuild trust and it brings about closure. Lastly, we take time to think what we could do differently in the future.

Being prepared — We consider an action we can take in a similar situation in the future that would meet both the needs we did not meet and those we were trying to meet. For instance, let’s say that I yelled at my daughter because I wanted to be heard. While I was talking to her, she was scrolling on her phone. In raising my voice, I did not meet my need to treat her (and everyone) with respect. What can I do in a similar situation in the future to (a) treat my daughter with respect, and (b) meet my need to be heard? Maybe, when I notice that I’m getting angry, I will take time out. Later, I will ask to talk to her at a time when she is willing to set her phone aside.

The following is a chart showing the process we are describing. We identify the situation and we go through each step.

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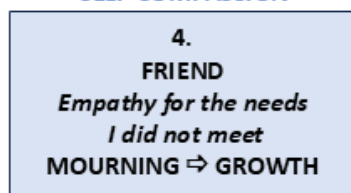
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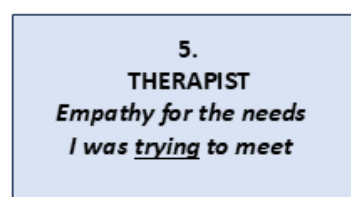
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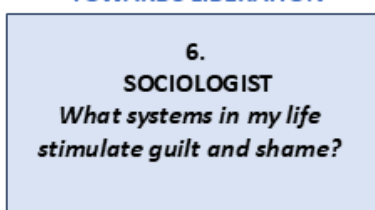
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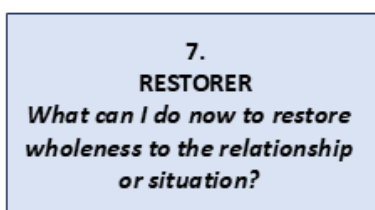
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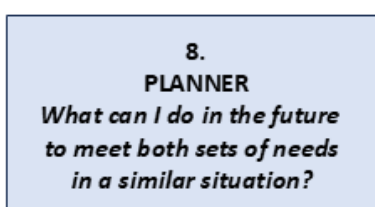
TOWARDS LIBERATION



RESTORATION



BEING PREPARED



Guilt and Shame Transformation Process

“You’ve never done anything wrong. You did something you wouldn’t have done, had you known then what you since have learned.”

~MARSHALL ROSENBERG

1. **Reporter** — Bring to mind something you did or said recently or long ago about which you feel guilt and shame.
2. **Judge** — What are you telling yourself *about yourself*? Write down your judgements and blame.
3. **Defender** — What are you telling yourself to justify or defend what you did?
4. **Friend** — Identify and connect with the needs — values — that this action did not meet. Be empathically present to yourself and mourn. Feel the pain of the unmet needs/values. Cry if you are able.
5. **Therapist** — Identify and connect with the needs you were trying to meet by the action. Give yourself empathy.
6. **Sociologist** — What systems do you inhabit or encounter that stimulate guilt and shame? These, for instance, might be the family, certain institutions, or the culture. What needs are you trying to meet by acting in accordance with those systems? What needs are you not meeting? Connect with the unmet needs.
7. **Restorer** — What can you do now to restore wholeness, either internally or to others who were impacted by your action? Wait silently until an answer arises from intuition.
8. **Planner** — Imagine that you encounter a similar situation in the future. What could you do to meet both sets of needs?

"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I change".

~ CARL ROGERS

Process adapted from Nonviolent Communication, the work of Marshall Rosenberg, PhD | www.cnvc.org

Empowerment Therapy Institute | www.empowermenttherapy.net

Guilt and shame stemming from adverse experiences

Sometimes we go through adverse, traumatic experiences that leave us feeling anguish, guilt and shame. Examples are emotional, physical, or sexual violence. In these situations, guilt and shame have no relation to our actions; they stem from a shattered sense of self and the belief that we could have prevented the event. We assume responsibility because facing that we were utterly out of control can make life terrifying. In this case, I suggest that we seek accompaniment either from a therapist, if we have mental health symptoms, or from an Empowerment practitioner.

Empathy and Mourning — We talk to someone who will listen with empathy. In a healing environment we mourn — we fully experience the emotions associated with the event such as rage, fear, sadness, sorrow and more. It is important to have clarity about the unmet needs in the situation, e.g., respect for our dignity, consideration, care, etc., and to recognize that we are not responsible for what happened to us. We mourn for as long as it takes to come to peace with the adverse experience.

Meditation — I submit that meditation is a critical component in transforming guilt and shame because it enables us to observe self-deprecating thoughts instead of being controlled by them. Over time, a meditation practice deconditions the mind. Long ago, when I was learning to meditate, the instructor predicted that the practice would result in increased kindness towards oneself. This came true for me. I have a robust meditation practice that, among other things, leads me to treat myself with affection and tenderness, most of the time.

In sum, I propose that receiving empathy, ample mourning and a meditation practice restore wholeness, increase resilience, and foster self-love. This has been my healing journey — I hope it contributes to yours.

Myra Walden has an MA in clinical psychology and has practiced psychotherapy for over 30 years. She is a certified trainer with the Center for Nonviolent Communication and a co-founder of the Empowerment Therapy Institute. She wrote the book Empowerment Therapy.

At the Empowerment Therapy Institute, we train therapists, coaches and helping professionals on how to forge relationships of trust with clients; implement innovative processes that promote healing, liberation and empowerment; and help them create more satisfying relationships and build more fulfilling lives. Our fees are comparatively low because we want to train many people who can bring the model to those without access to support services. Please visit our website: www.empowermenttherapy.net for information about our program, or for a referral to an Empowerment practitioner.

Myra and her partners Priti Sureka and Simran Bhola are actively seeking collaborators across the world to share this model. If interested, please email us at: empowermenttherapyinstitute@gmail.com