

Module 11

Guilt, Shame, and Your Thoughts

Continue with the food diary and keep logging your emotions as they come up at each eating episode.

MOST PROBLEMATIC EATERS experience guilt and shame daily, and often these shape their behaviors and actions toward themselves on a subconscious level. Guilt comes from believing the stories, rules, and regulations you have set for your life. When you fail to meet your own standards, this self-defeating emotion takes over. If you're feeling guilty, some of these thoughts may sound familiar:

- "I should have done better."
- "I am never going to get this."
- "I knew what to do, but I didn't do it."

Shame stems from guilty thoughts that build on each other and create a distorted, deeply rooted belief system about oneself. The system might look like this:

- "I'm defective."
- "I'm not worth fighting for."
- "I'm an unlovable person."

Perfectionism is often a trait associated with people who experience a high level of guilt and shame in their lives. If you have an unwritten rulebook you're trying to follow and label an action or thought as wrong, bad, or a mistake when you don't follow the rules in the book, you will find yourself caught in this spiral. Most often, these rules and regulations were formed when you were a child and are attached to old, outdated thoughts and belief systems. In other words, guilt and shame come from outdated files that create distorted thoughts and in turn self-destructive behavior. As Dr. Libby Weaver says, "There comes a point when the meanings we create no longer serve us. For example if you are always pleasing people to stop them from feeling disappointed in you so you can avoid guilt, it is likely to become exhausting after a while."²³ In other words, at some point, there must be a deeper look at what is causing the emotions and what rules need adjusting in our lives. Once you truly understand that your destructive eating patterns and behaviors stem from your thinking, you realize that you have all the power in the world to heal yourself. When you get caught up in the thoughts that are disempowering, self-sacrificing, and self-destructive, you can be sure that the behaviors to follow will also be just as toxic.

However, if you can notice the thoughts and transform them before they turn into stories and patterns, you can interrupt the behaviors, and in this way you can consciously choose the next right action. We all have old files we are acting, and reacting, to all the time. To update the files in our heads from Windows 98 to Windows 2014, we must first acknowledge that the files we are running are outdated and then have the willingness to update them.

As Byron Katie explains, "If you slow down and take a look, you will find that there is always a particular thought that triggers any stressful feeling."²⁴

Guilt is the feeling that you've done something wrong, and it usually follows a thought that says you didn't perform well enough or you "failed." Left unquestioned, large amounts of guilt become shame, which translates to "I am wrong." If you innately believe you are wrong or bad, then you will turn to guilt to keep you in that self-sacrificing belief system. It will tell you that you are responsible for other people's happiness and that it's your fault when they are feeling down. Shame then appears when the guilt is buried in the truth of the stories and beliefs you tell yourself over and over again.

To be free of the obsessive, guilty thoughts, you must really see that the guilt and shame are what keep you a prisoner. Outside circumstances don't keep you stuck; it's the rules and regulations you've created that say your job is to please others above and beyond what is

23 Libby Weaver, *Accidentally Overweight: Solve Your Weight Loss Puzzle* (USA: Little Green Frog, 2010), 264.

24 Byron Katie, *I Need Your Love—Is That True?* (New York: Three Rivers, 2005), 16.

serving you in your own life. So the paradigm shift here is *seeing guilt itself as the real problem* rather than people, places, and things on the external periphery of your life. To update your guilt and shame file system from Windows 98 to Windows 2014, you must begin to look at the real source of your discomfort: the thoughts and beliefs you tell yourself consciously or subconsciously every day.

Begin this new paradigm shift by recognizing how guilt and shame have affected your life up to this point. What has it kept you from doing or being? How have you felt prisoner to these feelings in the past? How do guilt and shame affect your self-destructive behaviors? Please share as authentically as you can below. Afterward, read what you've written. Has guilt or shame served you in your life? Do you believe you deserve the best life possible without feeling like you "should" be, or do more than what is currently unfolding? What would look different in your life if you let go of guilt and shame for good?

LETTING GO OF GUILT AND SHAME

First, we need the willingness to release the stories behind our disordered eating. They will pop up sometimes very unconsciously, and when we have the willingness to explore the thought patterns behind our symptoms, real recovery begins.

UPDATING OLD FILES

When did weight and shape first become an issue related to food? At what age did this happen? What was the major thought going on at that time?

That thought is your "cognitive file." When you have weight and shape issues, that file is triggered. You must become *aware* of it and *restructure* it. Put it in the trashcan! You have now identified the underlying thinking that's triggered. Diets didn't work because the issue was about your thinking. You can make good choices with good thinking.

In other words, a diet won't solve the *real* problem. It may help for a little while, but you will always come back to the vicious cycle. So, of course, you must eat well, but that isn't the magic pill.

Common signs (other than problematic eating) that your thoughts are fed by shame and guilt include the following:

- Rage—often a cover-up for deep shame
- Control—a need to control others or yourself unnecessarily
- Addictions (drugs, sex, work)
- Self-harm
- Body language (hiding, drawing back, not making eye contact, acting)
- Perfectionism
- Black-and-white thinking (“I’m always . . .” or “I will never . . .”)
- Procrastination
- Overachieving
- Victim mentality
- Desire to hide body (body shame)
- Arrogant talking/acting
- Belief of defectiveness
- Withdrawal and isolation from people and society

STEPS TO HEAL GUILT AND SHAME

1. Change the shame thinking.

If any of these resonate, you want to find the thinking that lies behind the shame-based sign and restructure each thought that is feeding the shame and guilt. See the structure below as a review.

Write your thoughts on a separate piece of paper and follow them through until you feel an emotional shift. At that point, you have reached the bottom of the distorted thought.

Example

Thought:

“I didn’t follow my food plan today. I failed.”

Result when you think this thought:

“I punish myself by overeating or bingeing.”

What is an alternative perception?

“I ate something I didn’t want to, but I am conscious of that now. I can get back to my plan and let that go. It’s not a big deal. In fact, I will investigate in a loving way why I ate that so I can learn for next time.”

What will you do now?

“I will get back to my plan of eating and trust that this is a process and I am learning. I will stay present by removing myself from the situation and calling my support network if my thinking is still shameful.”

Review of Perception Restructuring

Thought:

What is the result when you think this thought?

What is an alternative perception?

What did you do in the past that worked in this situation?

What will you do now?

After completing this process, you are able to find a thought that is present and hopeful. In this way you have changed your perception and your old files.

Of course, you will continue to do this as other negative thoughts arise, since this is a process. But you will be changing the thoughts one by one and really getting to the core problem. This isn't a Band-Aid but a long-term solution.

Byron Katie says, "Your most intimate relationship is the one that you have with your thoughts."²⁵

2. Meditation can be a beginning.

Feeling safe to explore these shameful thoughts may need to start with a mindfulness practice to bring you into your body and present to realize how you are feeling in the moment.

This adapted practice from John Makransky can help create that space of security and openness.²⁶

Find a quiet seat and come into the present moment by breathing into your heart space (the place you feel and experience warmth and well-being) and taking a couple of deep belly breaths to be grounded and centered. Next, relax your hands gently on your lap. Breathe love and light into your heart space, and as you do so, imagine a beautiful, cleansing white light radiating through your heart, soul, and entire body. Find quiet just in this space for a couple of minutes while watching the breath coming in and flowing out.

Next, begin to imagine someone you trust and feel safe with sharing this loving energy with you. As you inhale, you breathe in his or her love and acceptance, and as you exhale, let go of any restriction or anxiety you are feeling.

Really bathe in the feelings of love, safety, and trust as you maintain this image for a couple of minutes while you continue to breathe.

Lastly, let go of the image and just sit in this tenderness with your breath, allowing the stillness to calm your nervous system and allow for a place of compassion to exist.

3. Just as you held a pity party for loneliness, set time aside for a "shame party."

The best way to overcome shame is to feel it fully and experience it without running. Notice the guilt in your body and the thoughts you have attached to this guilt as you sit quietly.

²⁵ Byron Katie, *I Need Your Love—Is That True?* (New York: Three Rivers, 2005), 10.

²⁶ John Makransky, *Awakening through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2007).

Next, imagine you are a small child and that an adult is noticing the guilt and shame you've inflicted on yourself. Be gentle, but notice and bring in compassion to this space. By being fully present to the shame, you allow it to dissipate naturally.

4. Write a list of the things you think you should be doing.

Beside each item, write three actions steps you will take on a smaller level to start working toward these goals. Recognize that you're choosing to let go of the all-or-nothing thinking here and embrace what is possible just for today. Put these steps in your calendar as follow-up. Begin to implement these steps one day at a time, one week at a time, and create new habits, one step at a time.

- 1. _____

- 2. _____

- 3. _____

- 4. _____

- 5. _____

- 6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

NEGATIVE BODY IMAGE AND GUILT

The first step in healing a negative body image is to truly understand that each body is unique. Also, it is important to know that if you let go of all the rigid thinking and behaviors about food, shape, and weight, your body will find its natural, healthy weight quite organically. If you are still obsessed with trying to “be” a body size, weight, or shape that isn’t natural for you, you will constantly be trapped in the struggle of problematic eating. Obsessive body checking and weighing are a sign that you may need professional help to break the negative body image cycle and learn to trust that you are deserving of so much more.

Deciding that you are ready to be what your body is intended to be when it is following a regular pattern of eating is an essential step in recovery. Ironically, it truly is in letting go that you’re able to move forward. Intimate and consistent self-care is imperative here. Giving your body and mind the feedback that it is worth being taken care of will influence your ability to eat compassionately and feed your body the high-quality nutrients it truly deserves.

Also, begin to question the thinking you have around thinness and happiness. Do you believe the two are related? If this were true, wouldn’t this massive “diet” culture have been lost in pure joyful happiness around the globe? When you come to really accept yourself and begin to look inside to develop an authentic connection to your spirit, it is then that you will begin to experience *real* happiness, *real* joy. And ironically, it is then that the unhealthy

- Tai chi or qigong
- Meditation
- Dance
- Self-care and personal development books

A MEDITATION FOR BODY COMPASSION

Healing body image doesn't happen overnight. It is a process and requires daily reminders, self-care, and authentic connections to remember you aren't your size, weight, or shape. Daily recognition that you are on a path to healing and consistently working with the distorted thinking that has you stuck will bring freedom to this obsession.

What body part do you want to bring more healing attention to? If you could accept yourself as you are, how would that feel today? How would you live your life differently if you were in this space of radical acceptance?

Please share below.

Sit comfortably in a quiet space and begin to watch your breathing. Begin by grounding the body and taking three deep, full breaths, opening the mouth to exhale fully on each. Sit tall with a long spine and heavy lower body. Relax the shoulders and the back and concentrate for a few minutes on the normal breath—each inhalation and exhalation as it comes in and leaves the body. Once you are feeling centered and relaxed, begin to scan your outer body from head to toe, acknowledging every body part for all it does for you. Start with the head and then go to the face (eyes, ears, nose, and mouth). Travel to the neck, shoulders, arms, and hands, moving toward the chest, abdomen, and pelvic floor. Move to the legs, calves, feet, and toes. Pause for a moment on each spot and name at least two things this body part does for you and why it is so precious. If you are scanning a body part that has been more susceptible to criticism in the past, pause a bit longer and really focus your attention on how grateful you are for that part of your body.

After you scan your entire body, imagine a beautiful, clear white light entering your crown and flooding your entire body, replacing all its negativity, all the old hate. Imagine that as every body part and organ is filled with this luminous, brilliant white light, it is healed of criticism and judgment. Imagine your body as this divine light itself, moving through the universe in its unique way, allowing for its unique experience necessary to the planet. When you are complete, thank your body for being there for you. Dedicate the meditation to others who also might be struggling with their bodies so they too may be healed of judgment and criticism and be free of negative body image.

How was your week, being present?

What can you do differently this week?

Are there any places you want to avoid?

Are there specific places and times that make you want to eat even though you aren't hungry?
