

Guilt and shame

Objectives

This module will help you explore and understand:

- what guilt and shame are and why we have these emotions
- why it is important to manage these emotions
- how to deal with shame

What is guilt and shame?

Guilt and shame are often talked about as the same emotions but there are some key differences.

- Guilt is the acknowledgement that we have done something wrong, but that behaviour does not define who we are as a person. Someone experiencing guilt is able to recognise their pleasant qualities and still see themselves in a good light.
- Shame is the belief that we have done something wrong and that makes us a bad person. Someone experiencing shame may not be able to identify their pleasant qualities or see themselves in a good light.

We've worked with a lot of people who have committed offences online and have experienced guilt and shame. Feeling guilt and shame are normal reactions. But these emotions can be incredibly difficult to cope with and can lead to feeling overwhelmed and hopeless. This is sometimes referred to as the shame spiral.

The Shame Spiral



Adapted from Self Love and Rainbows

This module aims to help you recognise if you're feeling shame and ways you can overcome it so that you can build a healthier and offence free life.

Why is it important to manage these emotions?

We can think about guilt as a helpful emotion because it helps us to behave in line with our values and moral code. For example, if we value loyalty but behave in a way that is not loyal to friends or family (such as criticising them behind their back), we might feel guilt. This can then motivate us to be more loyal in the future in line with our values.

But shame is unhelpful, especially if we experience it for a long time. If someone sees themselves as a bad person, they might not see a way out of their situation or feel unable to change their behaviour. This can make them more likely to re-offend and potentially more likely to harm themselves.

Exercise 1: Recognising shame

We can experience and recognise shame in different ways, including physical, emotional and behavioural signs. Being able to recognise when you feel ashamed is the first step in being able to manage that feeling so that it doesn't become unhelpful.

There are some examples in the table below of how some people recognise if they are experiencing shame, and some might apply to you. Try to identify other signs and add them to the table.

Physical cues (how our body reacts)	Emotional cues (how we feel)	Cognitive cues (what we think)	Behavioural cues (how we behave)
Feeling sick	Feeling worthless	I am a terrible person	Drinking more
Sweating	Feeling rejected	I don't deserve support	Avoiding people

If you struggle to identify your feelings then please see the module [recognising and dealing with feelings](#).

Reflecting on what we have covered so far, ask yourself: which do you think you are experiencing – guilt or shame?

We strongly encourage the people we work with to try to move away from shame. Sometimes people are reluctant to do this, believing that they should feel bad because of what they have done. We are not excusing offending or suggesting people should not feel regret or guilt.

But shame is not helpful. It makes it more difficult for you to move forwards – away from the offending behaviour – and towards making a valuable contribution to your family, friends and society.

How to deal with shame

We've worked with a lot of people who have committed sexual offences and have experienced guilt and shame. These feelings are normal and feeling guilty can help make sure you don't engage in harmful behaviour in the future. However, shame can be incredibly difficult to cope with and can lead to feeling overwhelmed and hopeless, which can prevent you from moving to an offence free life.

Here are some techniques you can use to manage your feelings of shame.

Accept responsibility for your mistake

Facing what you have done is the first step toward forgiving yourself. Don't make excuses or try to justify your actions.

See this as an opportunity to learn and grow as a person. Identify where you could have done better and make a plan for how to handle similar situations in the future. This can help give you the confidence that you won't repeat your mistakes.

Talk about your feelings

It can be really helpful to talk to someone else about how you feel. Other people are often good at challenging you or pointing out things that you do well. They will see the whole person and not just the behaviour. By sharing how you feel, the emotions can become easier to manage. If you need help with talking about your thoughts and feelings, visit our [recognising and dealing with feelings](#) module.

Find an emotional outlet

Making changes in your life can cut down on unpleasant emotions, but it won't eliminate them. As you make changes in your life to reduce **unpleasant** emotions such as shame, you will also need to find healthy outlets for dealing with these emotions, for example:

- regular **exercise** provides an emotional lift and an outlet for unpleasant emotions
- **meditation** can help stop you from feeling overwhelmed
- finding opportunities for having fun and getting more **laughter** in your life can also change your perspective and relieve stress.

Find a few of these outlets, and you'll feel less overwhelmed when having unpleasant emotions.

Work on your self-talk

What you say to yourself in your mind is called self-talk. It can have a really great impact on your self-esteem and confidence.

When we feel shame, it can be difficult to see the good things about ourselves and our lives. The shame spiral can make us only focus on the negatives. We might, for example, expect others to only think badly about us. It is important to get yourself out of the spiral.

One way of doing this is to recognise your unhelpful or negative thoughts and balance them with a more realistic view. To do this, remind yourself of the good things about yourself and your life. Make a list of things you like about yourself, things you are good at, things you have achieved, and things other people like about you. It can be useful to carry the list around with you and look at it when you feel shame. Keep adding to the list and keep reminding yourself of the positives.

If you are unsure of positive and negative thinking (otherwise known as self-talk) then please work through our [self-talk](#) module.

*Please return to the **Reflection** tab to the module to reflect on your progress after completing it.*