

## CHAPTER 5

# GUILT: HOW TO DEAL WITH A SUPER-CRITICAL CONSCIENCE

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**G**uilt represents a battle or fight within our own mind. It occurs when we engage (automatically) in certain critical thoughts about ourselves and our behaviour, and we lash ourselves.

In most instances, guilt arises when we **criticise** ourselves, or our actions. Less often it follows events where we are (or rather, where we believe ourselves to be) criticised by others. In any event, the bad feelings we call “guilt” is the result of us engaging in acts of mental cruelty to ourselves through self-criticism. Guilt is a common source of stress and of negative feelings that undermine wellbeing. It is often a legacy of our approval needs not being adequately fulfilled in our formative years.

Often it is our super-critical conscience, aided and abetted by the Barrier (Chapter 1), which is responsible for undermining our self-esteem, and for reinforcing bad feelings about ourselves. The thing to remember, however, is that this undermining influence occurs in the here-and-now whenever you experience the bad feelings. It is not something that happened in the past that cannot be corrected. For this reason, once we get to know **when** the self-

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criticism is actually occurring, we can deal with it and stop this negative cycle.

Dealing with one's super-critical conscience requires you to start doing one thing – and one thing only. That is to simply **observe** your own mental processes, particularly that chain

of events involving **bad feelings** (guilt), and the thoughts (self-criticism) which occurred immediately prior to the bad feelings. This task is harder than it sounds because over time our self-criticism becomes automatic, a habit, with the negative thoughts involved having gone 'underground', and operating outside our awareness. But it is nevertheless possible to 'tune in' to your habitual self-criticisms at the time you are experiencing feelings of guilt. This recognition paves the way for breaking the habit.

One way of recognising your critical thoughts is that you are likely to hear yourself using the words "**I should...**" or "**I shouldn't...**". These words indicate that you are having an internal fight. A fight between the part in you that feels responsible for doing or not doing something, and another part of your personality, your super-critical conscience.

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As you become aware of these inner tussles, and the words your conscience uses to put you down, you may even be able to recognise key words or phrases that were originally used by your parents (or teachers) when they criticised you. And what is happening is that **now** you are doing their job, in their absence – like a parrot. The external criticism pattern is now internalised – operating as a mental or inner habit that we hardly notice.

But with awareness, with recognition of what is going on, when it is going on, you can decrease that type of parroting. All you need do is be aware of when you are being hard on yourself, and how, and make a mental note of your observations. Don't get carried away with the criticisms. Just mentally tell yourself, "I am aware that I am saying ... and ..."

We can know when the super-critical conscience is operating by noticing its effects – we experience guilt and feel bad about ourselves

Become an interested **observer** of the automatic processes that occur mentally.

Before, you were an active **participant** in the criticism – you fuelled the fires. You believed the criticisms. Becoming aware of your mental processes breaks that participant role. With that break, the magnitude and the damaging effects of the self-criticism diminishes over time.

It is important that you don't criticise yourself if, from time to time, you do fuel the fire and get carried away with self-criticism. Just observe, and make a mental note that that is what you are doing. In due course you will automatically gain control over those processes, without really trying – just by being uncritically aware!

I have suggested that one way of recognising when you are being super-critical is by homing in on your '**should**' '**shouldn't**' words

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in your stream of consciousness. Another way to discover when your super-critical conscience is operating is to monitor your feelings.

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effects – we experience guilt and feel bad about ourselves. This means that whenever you experience feelings of guilt you need to analyse the **thoughts** you had immediately beforehand, and while you are feeling guilty. You need to ask yourself, “What is it that I have just been thinking?” These thoughts are in fact the current (here-and-now) cause or trigger of your bad feelings.

What is happening is that the actual feelings you experience are mostly ones created or conditioned in childhood and recorded in memory, and your current critical thoughts revive them, or ‘replay’ them. As you learn to recognise these kinds of destructive thoughts through uncritical awareness you simultaneously gain control over them, and thereby reduce your bad feelings over time.

When you have strong reactions, your Parent or Child is likely to be operating

An excellent way of understanding the workings of the super-critical conscience is provided by a psychotherapeutic school called Transactional Analysis (TA for short). This approach was developed by Eric Berne, and popularised in the book “I’m OK – You’re OK” by Thomas Harris. You may already be familiar with this book. If not, do yourself a favour and get a copy. It is available from large book stores, and possibly your local library. In my opinion, “I’m OK – You’re OK” is a very good book for understanding the workings of one’s personality, and the inner mental processes that determine our current feelings.

Briefly, TA describes our personality as being made up of three ‘parts’ – called respectively, Parent, Adult and Child ego states. (They are not actual ‘parts’, but ways of being – of thinking and feeling). Only one ego state can be ‘active’ at any one point in time, but one can ‘switch’ from one mode to the next very quickly.

Let us briefly look at each of the ego states.

The Parent is made up of recordings in the mind, going back to early childhood. It is the ‘authority’ in our mind, made up of the things we heard and experienced from our parents over the first five years of life. It includes both critical and nurturing messages. The Parent affects our lives in the present by coming

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out as ‘internal dialogue’ in which we hear “the same applause, warnings, accusations, and punishments we heard when we were toddlers” (Harris and Harris, “Staying OK”, page 15).

Also taking part in the inner dialogue is the Child. The Child can be viewed as the feelings you originally experienced as a child, but are now embedded in your mind, like a tape recording that can be ‘replayed’ in the present. The recordings are usually replayed when things upset you in the here-and-now. The Child can be ‘activated’ or brought to the fore by external events, but more likely by the inner criticism engaged in by the Parent inside your own mind.

The third part of the personality is the Adult. This ego state (or personality aspect) is the rational decision-making part of your personality. It evaluates, calculates, reasons and understands – and can arrive at considered decisions and conclusions. It is the part of your personality which has been primarily engaged in reading this book – except when you have experienced strong personal reactions to the material being read. When you have strong reactions, your Parent or Child is likely to be operating.

TA says that at any one point in time you can only be in one ego state – Parent, OR Adult, OR Child – although it is possible to shift from one ego state to another very rapidly. This in fact often happens with people who have a super-critical conscience (or in TA terms, an overly strong Critical Parent).

If you have an overly developed Parent you are likely to be able to quickly spot mistakes and faults in others AND in yourself, and be quick to criticise. If you criticise or fault yourself, the result is

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that you activate or trigger your Child (and therefore feel guilt, hurt, and other negative emotions conditioned in childhood). When this happens your Adult is more-or-less out of action, as if it was asleep!

The thing to do to change this state of affairs is to engage your Adult ego state more. How? By **observing** your mental activities – noticing your thoughts and feelings and getting to know the chain of events which rapidly occurs in your mind. Get to know which ego state is operating when, and what follows. By observing and monitoring your reactions, your Adult is in fact working and

thereby getting stronger and it is at the same time interrupting or ‘switching off’ the other ego states which are normally hyper-active and engaging in a familiar dance. You have probably already noticed that whenever you get upset the same old familiar feelings and thoughts come up – you’ve been there before! It is like listening to a record, albeit a personal, **painful** one.

As a rule, the formula for experiencing guilt goes something like this – Something goes wrong, or you **think** it has gone

wrong. This activates or ‘plays’ the critical Parent. (The word “should” is likely to be in your thoughts when that happens). The Parent criticises and punishes, which in turn arouses your Child – your feelings of hurt and guilt. Before you know it, you are wallowing in all those negative feelings.

The thing to remember is that normally the above sequence happens very, very quickly, and you hardly notice any of the steps except the last – the guilt and pain. But in time you can ‘retrace your steps’, as it were, and analyse the other mental events which preceded the guilt. It takes time, and a commitment to observe and monitor your inner processes. It is important to recognise your feeling records (the Child), and the inner dialogues between the Parent and the Child – and to see them for what they are, records and habits from the past which are now being replayed in an automatic fashion.

Although your reactions are occurring in your mind now, they are conditioned habits (feelings and thoughts) from the past, which have no real relevance to the current situation. This may be hard to accept, because when our feelings or beliefs are aroused we can justify and rationalise how they ARE relevant to the situation. But the predictability and recurring nature of

our reactions gives us clues that they are suspect, that they are merely ‘old tunes’ being replayed.

Remember, whilst you have or experience feelings and beliefs, **you are not your feelings and beliefs**

As you become aware of the inner patterns, you make it possible to distance yourself from them. You do this by slowly stepping aside from those processes over time. You realise these negative processes for what they are – conditioned reactions that served to explain

hurts arising from childhood psychological need-frustration – and which you previously thought were the ‘gospel truth’.

Remember, whilst you have or experience feelings and beliefs, **you are not your feelings and beliefs**. In the past it is likely that you automatically believed the contents of those inner records. As you observe and analyse – by using your Adult – you automatically, if slowly, disengage from those habits, and arrive at a much clearer and more rational understanding of the inner workings of your mind, and the self-destructive habits diminish in terms of their influence on your well-being.

These positive changes are not sudden and dramatic, nor heralded by thunderclaps and lightning. (If you do experience thunderclaps and lightning, it’s probably the weather!) One of the wisest books ever written, the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tsu, reminds us that, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”.

I want to emphasise that the changes about which I speak, of reducing your feelings of guilt, will not occur instantly. They can take months. You are like a bricklayer who starts by laying a single brick, follows it with another, until finally after weeks or months produces an impressive structure, a house. But you

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must stick to the task, even if you have temporary setbacks. Failures, too, can be the building blocks of success – if you persist with pursuing your goals. Perseverance is a fundamental key for all kinds of success.

And you won’t just stop having negative feelings – they are likely to remain present for a long time, perhaps forever. But what will

happen is that your attitude towards having those feelings will change. They lose their power to upset you. Their energy fades.

Another significant change that can occur is that whilst you can acknowledge **feeling guilty**, you will not automatically **assume you are guilty and deserving of punishment**. You will learn to be kinder to yourself, and also develop pride. To help you develop pride you need to open the door to welcoming feeling good, and bathing in those positive feelings, when they arise.

I would urge you then, not to be disappointed (and in particular, **don't criticise yourself**) if there are no instant changes. Rome was not built in a day, and you need to be patient to enable the changes I have spoken of to take place. If you are simply able

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to note how you regularly re-experience feelings of guilt for yourself as a by-product of your here-and-now negative thoughts, that is terrific. By being aware, and not accepting those thoughts as valid, you are automatically paving the way for giving up your self-criticism, and thereby your guilt.

Now at some stage during this chapter a thought may have crossed your mind that it is useful to be self-critical, because it keeps you toeing the line, preventing failure or mistakes. You might think you're better off being hard on yourself. Just be aware that this is a process similar to the Barrier (it stops you from making changes about how you react). It actually is the activation of the Parent state, which unconsciously drives you to be or do better in order to avoid whatever pain you experienced during childhood. Acknowledging this allows you to engage your Adult in its stead.

Another source of guilt, apart from childhood conditioning, is when we deviate from proper or moral courses of action. The best strategy for reducing that type of discomfort is to make decisions with awareness, anticipating the likely consequences and desisting

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from actions that have negative effects on others or oneself. Although nobody is perfect, by making ongoing efforts to act wisely and with a positive heart we can reduce our experience of guilt and self-inflicted stress.

To give you an idea of how time and patience is required for things to improve, and that you may be making progress, even when you can't see it, I will now share a short piece written by a lady whom I saw in therapy.

She suffered from guilt quite a lot. Your experiences may not be identical, but I'm sure there are some common ingredients which may give you encouragement and renewed hope. You might also keep an eye out for the Barrier (dissonance) as you read this. Life is full of opportunities for self-discovery, even when reading about other peoples' experiences!

## **MY JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF-ACCEPTANCE**

*“Low self-esteem is very self defeating. Life and relationships seem difficult. Unhappiness becomes the norm. I know I hated myself, thought that I wasn't smart, that I didn't look good, that in fact I wasn't even a good person. I was often depressed and fearful. I acted like a victim unable to take charge of my life, allowing others to be in control. My negative perceptions coloured everything I thought and did. I believed that others made me unhappy whereas in reality I made myself unhappy.*”

*Changing is hard. (Taking back responsibility for your own behaviour is tough – it's easier to blame other people). And it takes a long, long time. Things often seem to get worse, not better*

I am finally learning to be kind to myself, to recognise the negative self-talk that has contributed to my poor self-concept. **The wonderful thing that I have learned is that I am a good person – I can look at myself honestly now and like what I see**

*(like they're supposed to). In the beginning I would wake up and say to myself, 'Is today the day my life will turn around, am I going to be happy, will people treat me well and love me?' No – not today. I thought it would just happen – like magic! There were times, lots of times when I felt very alone, nobody seemed to understand how I was feeling although they tried, but their attempts to make me feel better often backfired. They had all the clichés in the world, but no real concept of the confusion I felt. My conversations became filled with analogies as I tried to make sense of how I felt. I was often alone at sea, trapped in mazes or pressed into corners with no escape!*

*I wanted someone to tell me the answers, tell me what to do and make everything better.*

*But I had no co-operation from my therapist – he didn't give me the quick answers I was hoping for. Seemed I had to find my own answers and solutions.*

*Over the months of therapy I gained some of the insights I needed to change my behaviour and outlook. They had to be repeated over and over, but I am finally learning to be kind to myself, to recognise the negative self-talk that has contributed to my poor self-concept. **The wonderful thing that I have learned is that I am a good person – I can look at myself honestly now and like what I see.** I*

## *Let your true self shine*

*have learnt to love myself and with this comes a power that nobody can take from me. Magic? No way! I'm now clawing my way up a mountain and no one's pushing me down or taking away things I learnt the hard way!"*

If this lady can transform her negative feelings about herself, you can too!

## **ANOTHER EXAMPLE**

Below are the comments from another client after he had terminated brief counselling:

*"I thought it was strange! Even weird! I mean I had a job from which I earned good money, I owned my own car and I was in college bettering myself. Not to mention the fact that I was 18 years of age and had everything to live for. Well at least I should have, for I didn't feel this way.*

*The thing is I recognised that I was lucky and had great opportunities etc. etc., but yet I couldn't make myself believe this. I was totally unmotivated yet I wasn't sure why. As I said, I had everything to live for.*

*I was at first sceptical about going to therapy, what with psychologists' high fees and as my mother always said, 'Only one person can work out your problems and that person is yourself'. I realise what she said was true but it's the little things from therapy I learnt that keep us motivated.*

*For instance, I always blamed myself without questioning why I did so. After indulging in some nice food I would feel guilty. I would even feel guilty for being at a certain place at a certain time.*

*This is how bad I felt.*

*With therapy I have learnt to recognise why I used to feel the way I did and also with the simple P.A.C. (Parent Adult Child) concept I'm able to combat feelings of guilt.*

*The interesting thing is by using P.A.C. (which I felt was made especially for me as it is my initials backwards) things are more logical and make more sense. And I don't feel guilty anymore. And if at anytime I do – I go back to the basics of P.A.C. and slowly become better.*

***Not only do I feel good, but I am finding out things about myself I never really knew. My character is really coming on and I like everything I see and am interested about what else I will learn about myself in the future. Before I used to let life come to me and let whatever happen, happen. Now I'm going forward with all my might and the day I stop will hopefully be the day I die.***

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*My scepticism of psychologists has also gone and the people who do criticise them most probably haven't had the benefit of one or had a bad one (as I believe my mum did). In fact it has increased my appetite to find out more about the subject, myself and other people" (C.A.P).*

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**References:**

- Harris, T.A. *I'm OK – You're OK.* (1973). New York, Avon Books.  
 Harris, A.B. and Harris, T.A. (1985). *Staying OK.* Sydney, Harper & Row.